

Free Climbing, 1980

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THE REALM of 5.13 is here. In just a few short years the standards of free climbing have shot upward at a speed consistent with the climbing-population explosion. The climbs of today are not only more difficult, move for move, but also have severe, long, sustained sections or even entire pitches of desperately strenuous climbing.

Looking up at many of the new rock climbs can be an exhilarating and sobering experience. Some are identifiable only by some obscure, lonely bolt in the midst of a sea of blank granite, while others are all too obviously thin cracks on vertical to overhanging walls. The evolution of technical rock climbing has been progressing at an accelerating tempo that makes one wonder if there is a limit to what is possible.

In each era there are a few people responsible for raising the standards, and their attitudes and genius are passed on to the next generation for continued modification. Therefore the "old dads" of yesterday have all contributed to the present state of affairs or "state of the art." Each in his own way has expanded the concepts and beliefs to make our present state of affairs or "state of the art." Each in his own way has expanded the concepts and beliefs to make our present reality.

Today's climbing avant-garde is continually advancing the sport at a rapid rate. The greater number of climbers has made being at the top more competitive than ever. Man's desire to be remembered, to leave a legacy, is becoming increasingly difficult. Many excellent climbers go unnoticed, blending in with a multitude of other excellent climbers. When I started climbing, there were only three 5.10 pitches in the Yosemite, but now it is the predominate rating with most climbing at that standard.

There are different ways of looking at these developments. Alan Rouse, the famous British rock specialist of the late 1960s and the 1970s, put it this way, "The criterion of difficulty is how many people can do it, not some vague quality that's supposed to exist independent of people. If you think it's hard, either because of 'technical difficulty' or because you think you'll get the chop, then it's a hard route." The exceptional young climbing team of Mark Hudon and Max Jones have this view of

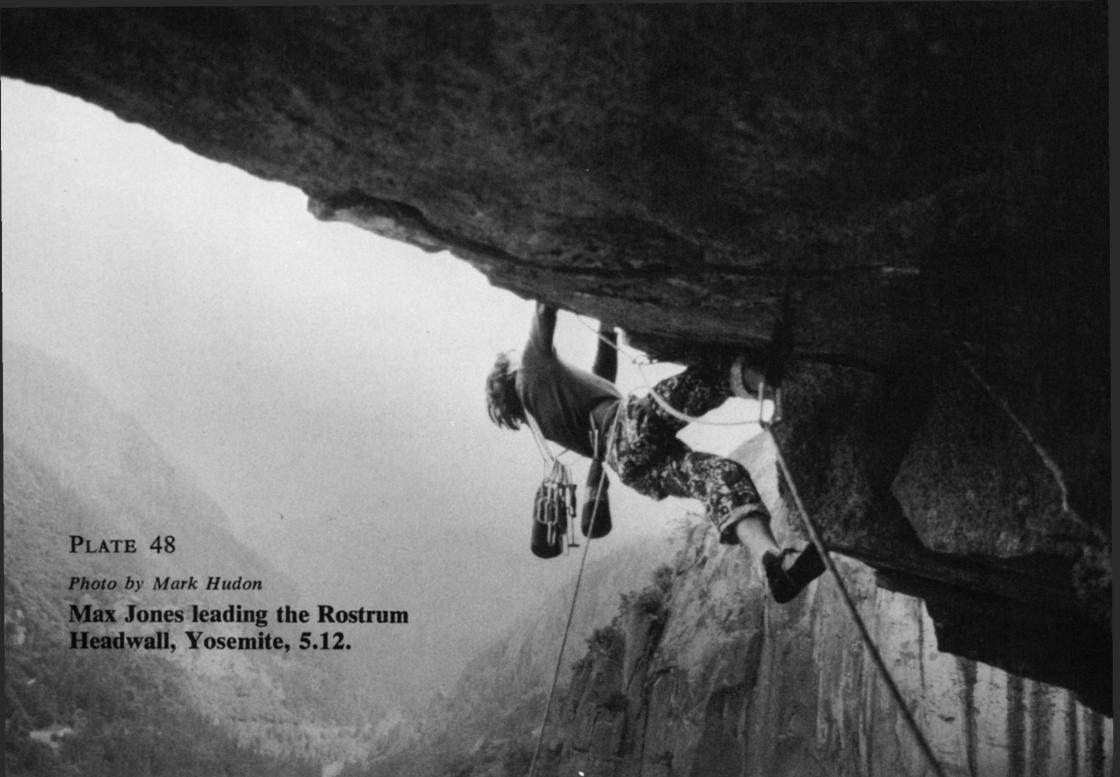


PLATE 48

Photo by Mark Hudon

**Max Jones leading the Rostrum
Headwall, Yosemite, 5.12.**

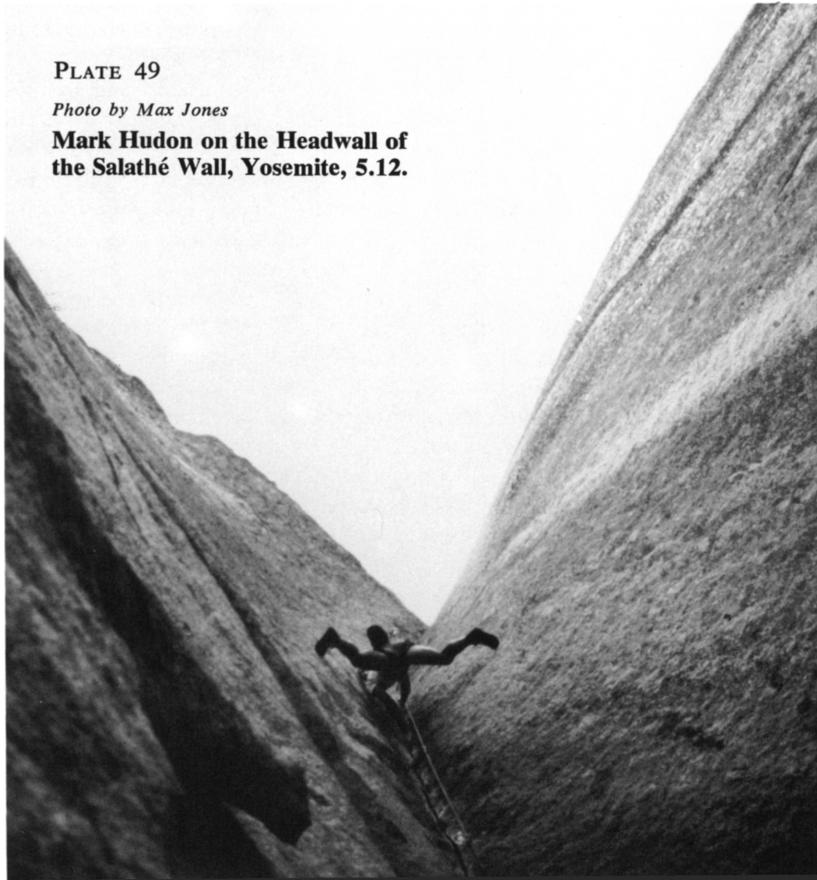


PLATE 49

Photo by Max Jones

**Mark Hudon on the Headwall of
the Salathé Wall, Yosemite, 5.12.**

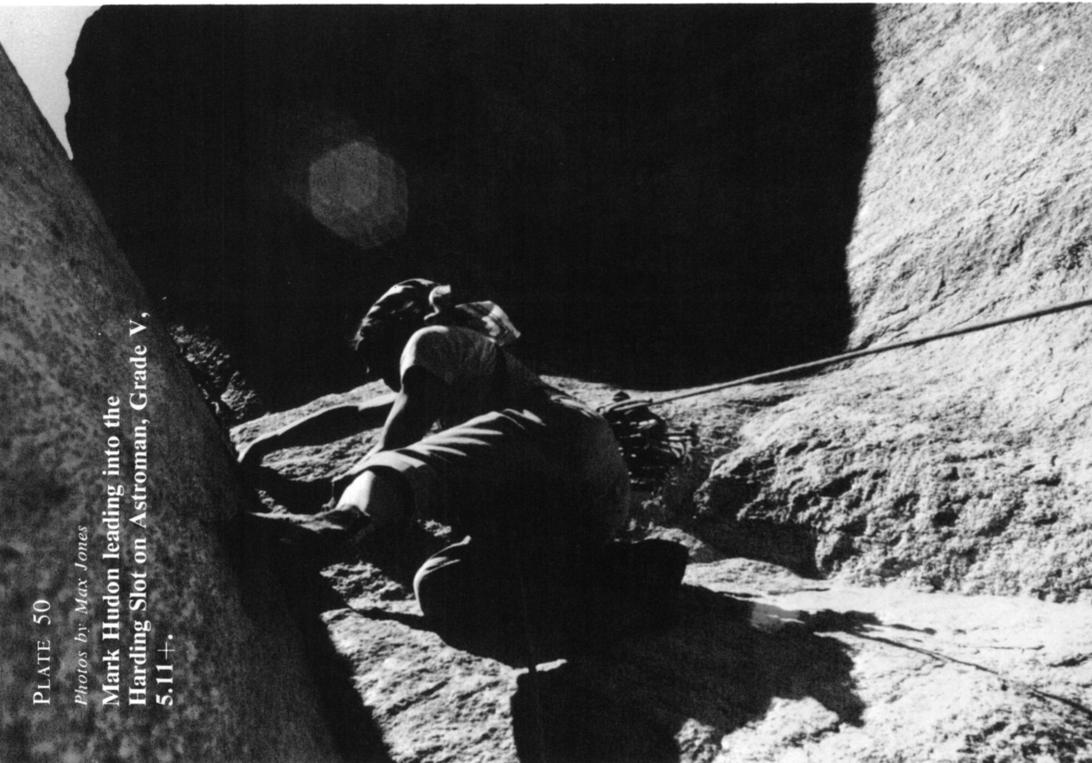
PLATE 51

On the **DIAMOND**, Longs Peak,
Colorado, Grade V, 5.11⁺.



PLATE 50

Photos by Max Jones
Mark Hurdon leading into the
Harding Slot on Astroman, Grade V,
5.11⁺.



what they call "rock gymnastics." "Climbing 5.12 and harder routes is actually a sub-sport of rock climbing. It has lost all relation to classic mountaineering. Pitches of this difficulty are not yet being led and followed regularly in one push. The routes go beyond that—when one gets the least bit tired or sloppy, one just falls off! Most 5.12s, like a gymnastic routine, require many attempts to wire the moves, memorize the sequence and then put all the pieces together. The rock is our apparatus; climbing is our routine."

One thing is certain. The standards have been going up and the reasons are evident. Training is one of the predominate causes of this continued upswing. Physical conditioning has reached olympian dimensions, and with some climbers is more important than climbing itself. But this does not preclude the possibility of a finite limit to what is possible. In their article in *Mountain 66* Max Jones and Mark Hudon present the "human variable" as a possible limiting factor. They say, "We are approaching the limit of human ability. The finger-, hand-, arm- and foot-size, along with height and weight, are all playing a bigger part in how hard a route is for the individual. As we move on to 5.13 (and be warned—it's coming), body size will become more important. And when 5.14 arrives, you will have to be made just so—or sorry, you can just forget it."

These ideas appear to be true enough but there are other limits which have been appearing with increasing frequency. Physical injuries of various types have become prevalent. Strained, torn or ruptured finger tendons are now commonplace whereas ten years ago these injuries were almost unheard of. The skin of course has always been vulnerable but because of unrealistic pressures put on it, oozing sores and infections keep many climbers side-lined. But the most alarming injury is arthritis, a residual effect of long-term abuse to the joints. These and other crippling ailments, such as tendonitis and pulled or torn muscles, will set the limit for the future. The body apparently wasn't designed to endure this type and intensity of abuse.

Has living or the experiencing of climbing become of secondary importance to the *symbols* of the climbing experience? Maybe Einstein was eluding to human nature in general when he said, "What we have is a perfection of means and a confusion of aims." Are we near the limits of physical ability or are we approaching a barrier in the human psyche, a motivational impasse? These are questions for the future, but these photos should tell where the "state of the art" is today.